DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 506 EA 013 698

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TITLE Views of Educators, Students, and Parents Regarding Important Discipline Problems, Related Influences, and Corrective Actions.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 20p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Los Angeles, CA, April 13-17, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes: *Discipline Policy: *Discipline Problems: Elementary Secondary Education: Influences: *Parent Attitudes: State Surveys: *Student Attitudes: *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Tennessee

ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted to determine educator, student, and parent perceptions regarding school discipline in Tennessee. Nearly 4,000 educators and 3,000 students responded to instruments designed to ascertain existing discipline problems, related influences, and appropriate corrective actions. Various demographic characteristics were used in data analysis. Educators, students, and parents identified apathy and inattention as two of the leading discipline problems. Out-of-school influences were seen as most important, with differences in specific factors mentioned. Conferences with students or parents were consistently recommended to handle problems, but their widespread use was not evident. (Author)

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Views of Educators, Students, and Parents Regarding Important Discipline Problems, Related Influences, and Corrective Actions

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Los Angeles, California
April 14, 1981

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EA 013 698

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FEATURES OF THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

During the 1978-79 academic year, a major study of discipline in Tennessee schools was conducted. In that large scale study, nearly four thousand teachers, administrators, and other school personnel responded to a survey instrument which provided extensive information about the current status of school discipline across the state. The results of that investigation have been published in a monograph[1], a professional journal[2], and a Tennessee Education Association pamphlet[3]. The study has also received statewide coverage via newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, and correspondence with school district leaders.

As data provided by the educator sample were being analyzed, however, it became apparent that the potential impact of the study could be substantially increased by examining the problem from several additional vantage points. The perspectives of parents and students would be especially valuable in building a comprehensive portrayal of school discipline in Tennessee. As the annual Gallup Polls of the public's attitudes toward the public schools have consistently shown, discipline is perceived as the leading problem schools face. Other respected media sources have featured reports emphasizing the level of public concern regarding school discipline. In

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[1]Jerry J. Bellon, E. Dale Doak, Janet R. Handler. A Study of School Discipline in Tennessee. Monograph of the College of Education, The University of Tennessee, May. 1979.

[2]Janet Handler, "Improving School Discipline: How Supervisors Can Help." TASCD Journal, 6(1): Winter, 1980, p. 25-29.

[3]Jerry J. Bellon, E. Dale Doak, and Janet R. Handler. School Discipline in Tennessee: A Study by The University of Tennessee and the Tennessee Education Association. Pamphlet published by The Tennessee Education Association, June, 1979.

view of the progress made in the 1978-79 study, a parallel investigation designed to examine the parent and student views appeared to be an important follow-up project. A descriptive approach was utilized to conduct both studies. Information pertaining to the research objectives was obtained by means of questionnaires developed for each study. The questionnaire used in the Follow-Up Study was a parallel version of the comprehensive instrument utilized in the 1978-79 study, with appropriate modification for the client groups involved.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The original and follow-up studies were designed to determine educator, student, and parent perspectives regarding school discipline in Tennessee. In particular, the research focused on: the extent and nature of discipline problems in Tennessee schools; the conditions or influences associated by school personnel, students, and parents with these problems; and the current and recommended approaches for dealing with persistent discipline concerns.

Specific objectives which guided the research activities were to:

1. Identify the extent and nature of discipline problems in Tennessee schools.
2. Determine which discipline problems are considered to be most significant.
3. Identify key conditions or influences related to school discipline problems.
4. Determine the views of educators, students, and parents regarding approaches to solving discipline problems.

SUBJECTS

The sampling plan for the original study was designed to obtain representative respondent groups from all pertinent subpopulations. The State Department of Education maintains an index system which was utilized to categorize schools as rural, town, small city, or large city. Schools are also identified by socio-economic classification as low, medium or high. The nine classifications of schools used are: rural-low; rural-high; town-low; town-high; small city-high; small city-low; large city-low; large city-medium; and large city-high. The schools in each of these nine groups were identified as elementary, junior high/middle, or high schools. This process provided twenty-seven subpopulations from which to select an appropriate sample.

A stratified random sampling procedure was used to select the sample which included ten percent of the schools and ten percent of the teachers in all subpopulations. The sample was drawn to insure that ten percent of the teachers from the four major cities in the state would be included.

The sample drawn included 5,087 teachers, principals, and other school personnel (e.g. guidance counselors). A total of 3,783 questionnaires was returned. This represented a 74.3 percent return rate, with responses received from 3,354 teachers, 139 principals, and 290 other educators (e.g. guidance counselors, supervisors or special teachers).

The sampling plan for the follow-up study was designed to include comparable numbers of students and parents representing three different types of school districts: rural, small city, and large city. Although geographic/socioeconomic characteristics had not been associated in the large scale 1978-79 study with important response variations, a broad spectrum or participation was sought for the student and parent follow-up. Three Tennessee school districts, one of each type, were selected for the research and their

superintendents contacted to secure permission. Each superintendent identified at least one elementary school, middle or junior high, or high school which he judged to be typical of schools in that district. Principals were then contacted to make arrangements for conducting the study.

The projected sample was designed to include two classes of students at each grade level (5-12) in each district or approximately 400 students per district (estimating 25 students per class). The parent sample was balanced across grade levels and schools to yield approximately 400 potential respondents per district. In the large city district utilized for the study, unforeseen circumstances led to an imbalance in student representation by grade level, with more students in grades 7-9 than 10-12. However, this district's overall figure of approximately 500 student respondents and the elementary (grades 5-6) total of approximately 100 students were comparable to the other two districts.

The composition of the respondent group closely approximated the intended figures. There were 1288 student respondents, with 399, 396, and 493 from the rural, small city, and large city districts respectively. It is important to note that the sample was not designed to accurately portray any particular district, but rather to provide a relatively large group of scientifically selected subjects cutting across all designated grade levels and all three broad categories of school systems.

The return rate by parents was approximately ten percent of those sampled. This figure included a considerably higher representation of small city than large city parents. Nearly one third of the respondents had children in the rural school district, with just over half of the respondents representing the small city district and slightly less than one-fifth from the large city system. The low rate of return by parents sampled has been taken into account in reporting findings and drawing conclusions concerning that group.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT, EDUCATOR, AND PARENT RESULTS

The parallel designs of the original Study of School Discipline in Tennessee, which polled teachers, administrators, and other educators, and the Discipline Follow-Up Study of student and teacher perceptions has made possible the comparative analysis of results. In this section, findings from the two studies are juxtaposed to indicate similarities and differences in the perceptions of these groups.

Major Discipline Problems

Participants in the original and follow-up studies reacted to the same sixteen items in the first portion of the research instrument. These items presented a range of discipline problems commonly reported in the educational literature. Factors considered in developing the instrument are given detailed explanation in the original study monograph and the follow-up study report. Some changes in wording were made to simplify the survey instrument for students and parents; the tables in this section have been developed using the modified wording.

As noted in the footnotes to each table, there was also some modification in the directions for responding when the follow-up study was designed. Based on feedback from the pilot study, students were only asked to identify four important discipline problems and place these in rank order, whereas teachers had been asked to identify and rank six problems. The analysis procedure was also altered somewhat for the follow-up study, resulting in less merging of results. Responses concerning most important problem, next most important, and so on were analyzed separately in the student/parent research.

As shown in Table 1, students, parents, and teachers were not in close agreement regarding the leading school discipline problems. The problem students felt was most important, swearing or using foul language, was also

TABLE 1

Discipline Problems Identified as Highly Important
by Students, Educators, and Parents

Problem	Rank Among Students*	Rank Among Teachers and other Educators **	Rank Among Parents *
Swearing or using foul language	1	11	3
Stealing	2	12	4
Not paying attention	3	1	2
Showing little or no interest in schoolwork	4	4	1
Missing school without permission	5	9	11
Talking out of turn	6	2	6
Misbehaving as a result of other drug use	7	15	7
Being late for school or class	8	8	13
Cheating	9	7	10
Fighting	10	10	8
Damaging property	11	5	12
Abusing other students	12	6	14
Not staying in seat; overactive	13	3	9
Abusing teachers	14	13	5
Misbehaving as a result of drinking	15	16	16
Leaving class without permission	16	14	15

* Student rankings based on the frequency with which each problem was identified as most important

** Teacher rankings based on frequency with which the item was named among the top six discipline problems identified

** Low parent response rate (about 10 percent) should be noted in interpreting these results

a top concern of parents but only ranked eleventh among educator respondents. The latter group (primarily teachers) frequently named talking out of turn as a highly important problem. In this case, students and parents only gave it enough emphasis to rank sixth. Similarly, while overactive behavior placed third among teachers, it was thirteenth among students and ninth in the parent sample. Other problems felt to be considerably more important by educators than by students or parents were damaging property and abusing students.

Only two of the top rated discipline problems received similar degrees of emphasis in each of the three respondent groups. These were the closely related problems of not paying attention to lessons and showing little or no interest in schoolwork generally.

Problems which students felt to be quite a bit more important than teachers, parents, or both groups were: stealing; missing school without permission; misbehaving as a result of drug use; and the top ranked problem mentioned above, swearing or using foul language. Parents also felt that stealing, swearing, and misbehavior related to drug use merited greater emphasis than teachers gave these problems. In addition, parents selected abusing teachers as the most important discipline problem considerably more often than members of the other respondent groups.

Factors Influencing School Discipline Problems

Respondents in both the original and follow-up studies were asked to review a set of items representing factors related to school discipline. These factors, identified from the professional literature as key conditions or influences which may affect discipline, were presented in four categories; classroom; school; curricular/instructional, and out-of-school. The instrument developed for the educator sample included thirty-five specific factors,

approximately nine per category. Respondents were asked to choose at most three items which they felt contribute to the greatest extent to each of the three major discipline problems checked in the first portion of the questionnaire.

This portion of the survey was simplified to some extent for the student and parent study. Students in grades 8-12 and all parent respondents were asked to place the four major types of factors in rank order according to importance. Then, directions requested that they check at most three specific factors in each category which seemed most closely related to the major discipline problems in their schools. Respondents in grades 5-7 were provided an even simpler format in which they, too, ranked the four major categories but were not asked to select specific items from the examples provided.

Table 2 presents a comparative look at the views of students, teachers and other educators, and parents regarding influences on school discipline problems. All three respondent groups emphasized out-of-school factors as most closely related to important discipline problems. Classroom factors were the second most frequent choice by educators and parents, with school factors emphasized more often by student respondents. Curricular/instructional factors ranked fourth among students and teachers and third among parents, generally reflecting the lower priority attached to these influences by members of each respondent group.

When students, teachers and other educators, and parents identified the specific factors perceived to have the greatest influence on school discipline problems, responses showed marked discrepancies. Although all three groups rated out-of-school factors as most closely related, they emphasized different items within that category. Teachers and other educators gave overwhelming priority to improper training at home. This was the preferred response for nearly all major discipline problems cited. Parents also chose

TABLE 2

Factors Identified as Closely Related to Major Discipline Problems by Students, Educators, and Parents

Factor	Rank Among Students *	Rank Among Teachers and other Educators**	Rank Among Parents ***
Out-of-school			
Pressures from peers	1	6	4
Parent pressure to get better grades	2	8	7
Effects of TV, movies, etc.	3	2	3
Parents not involved enough in school	4	3	2
Poor diet, lack or rest, etc.	5	7	5
Improper training at home	6	1	1
Physical or mental problems	7	4	6
Conflicting jobs or activities	8	9	8
Effects of stereotypes	9	5	9
School			
Labeling students as "troublemakers"	1	5	4
Students not involved in setting discipline standards	2	6	7
Unfair enforcement of rules	3	8	8
No clear goals	4	7	2
Poor parent-school relations	5	4	1
Poor morale	6	2	5
Expected behavior not clear	7	3	6
Inconsistent policies	8	1	3
Classroom			
Student can't express feelings	1	3	6
Lack of encouragement	2	6	1
Poor human relations	3	4	4
Overcrowding	4	1	3
Students kept still too long	5	5	8
Too few materials	6	7	5
Behavior limits not set	7	2	2
Verbal abuse by teachers	8	8	7

continued on next page

TABLE 2 Continued

Factor	Rank Among Students *	Rank Among Teachers and other Educators**	Rank Among Parents ***
Curricular/Instructional			
Student needs and interests not considered	1	2	2
Expectations too high or low	2	4	5
Students with special needs not placed in proper classes	3	1	3
Goals and objectives not set	4	6	4
Poor techniques to motivate students	5	3	1
Poor planning	6	7	7
No system for keeping track of student progress and behavior	7	5	8
Teacher not properly assigned	8	9	6
Weak evaluation process	9	8	9

* Student rankings based on frequency with which each factor was checked as most closely related to school discipline problems

** Teacher rankings based on frequency with which each factor was cited in relation to top discipline problems named; frequencies of teacher responses for most factors other than those in out-of-school category were generally very low.

*** Low parent response rate (about 10 percent) should be noted in interpreting these results.

this factor most frequently. To students, however, pressure from peers was the most important consideration, with parental pressure for better grades ranking second (but eighth among teachers). Students also put greater emphasis than other respondents on the effects of stereotypes. All three groups agreed that television and movies were important influences, and that parents not being involved in school activities was also closely related to discipline problems.

In the school-related category, responses of teachers and students were even more divergent. The top four choices of students (labeling, lack of student involvement in setting standards, unfair enforcement of rules, and no clear goals) were only ranked between fifth and eighth by teachers and other educators. The educator sample placed most emphasis on: inconsistent policies; poor morale; unclear behavioral expectations; and poor parent-school relations. Parent responses were mixed as to their agreement with teachers or students.

There was generally closer agreement in the remaining two categories of classroom and curricular/instructional factors, as seen in Table 2. Students felt that inability to express their feelings in the classroom and lack of encouragement were most directly related to discipline problems. Among teachers and other educators, inability to express feelings ranked third, but lack of encouragement ranked only sixth. The classroom factor selected most often by teachers was overcrowding, one of very few items in categories other than "out-of-school" which received more than a limited number of responses.

Agreement on the curricular/instructional factors which affect school discipline was fairly close in all groups. Failure to consider needs and interests ranked first among students. Students with special needs not placed in proper classes was the most frequent choice of educators. Parents most often selected poor motivational techniques as a key concern. Each of these items ranked at least fifth in all three respondent groups.

Current and Recommended Disciplinary Actions

In the Discipline Follow-Up Study, students and parents were asked to select from a list of twenty-one disciplinary actions those which were currently used most often to deal with important problems and those which should be used most often. The original study of educators' views had not requested that they distinguish between what is currently done and what they judge to be the most appropriate strategies.

Parent and student responses showed considerable consistency in identifying the most common disciplinary actions in their schools. As shown in Table 3, with one exception the top eight items among students and parents were the same. The three actions perceived by parents and students as being used most often were: sending student to the principal's office; corporal punishment; and correcting the student publicly.

There was also quite strong student and parent agreement in identifying the actions which should be used most often. The top four items in these two respondent groups were: student is corrected privately; teacher signals awareness of problem; meeting with parents is held; meeting with student is held to plan for better behavior. Teachers and other educators agreed on the high importance of three of those items, with signaling awareness of the problem ranking eleventh in this group.

Agreement between students and teachers on the actions which should be used to deal with discipline problems was also very close. With one exception (the item on teacher awareness noted above), the top seven items in each group were the same (refer to Table 4). Among the moderately to seldom emphasized items, there was somewhat greater disparity. Students tended to rate the actions they reported as currently in use (e.g. sending to office, assigning extra work) more favorably than teachers. On the other hand, teachers and other educators viewed particular actions (e.g. withholding privileges;

TABLE 3

Student and Parent Views Regarding Current Disciplinary Actions Used Most Often *

Action	Rank Among Students	Rank Among Parents
Student is sent to principal's office	1	3
Corporal punishment or paddling is used	2	2
Student is corrected publicly	3	1
Student is suspended or expelled from school	4	7
Teacher signals awareness of problem	5	4
Student's seat is changed	6	6
Whole class or group is punished	7	9
Extra work is assigned	8	5
Detention is assigned	9	11
Privileges are taken away from student	10	13
Student is corrected privately	11	8
Student is removed from class activity	12	10
Meeting with student is held to plan for better behavior	13	12
Meeting with parent is held	14	16
Other teachers are talked to about the problem	15	15
Student is placed in another class	16	21
Administration is asked about the problem	17	20
Class is asked to help solve problem	18	14
Plan for rewarding good behavior is set up	19	18
Counselor or psychologist is talked to about the problem	20	19
Student is referred to a social, legal, or other agency	21	17

* Teachers and other educators were not asked this question in the original study.

TABLE 4

Disciplinary Actions Most Often Recommended
by Students, Educators, and Parents

Action	Rank Among Students	Rank Among Teachers and other Educators	Rank Among Parents
Student is corrected privately	1	3	1
Teacher signals awareness of problem	2	11	2
Meeting with parents is held	3	1	4
Meeting with student is held to plan for better behavior	4	2	3
Plan for rewarding good behavior is set up	5	5	6
Class is asked to help solve problem	6	6	11
Student's seat is changed	7	7	14
Student is suspended or expelled from school	8	14	13
Corporal punishment or paddling is used	9	9	5
Student is sent to principal's office	10	12	7
Extra work is assigned	11	16	15
Student is placed in another class	12	21	20
Privileges are taken away from student	13	4	10
Detention is assigned	14	15	16
Counselor or psychologist is talked to about the problem	15	8	12
Student is corrected publicly	16	10	8
Student is removed from class activity	17	18	9
Whole class or group is punished	18	20	17
Administration is asked about the problem	19	13	19
Other teachers are talked to about the problem	20	17	18
Problem is referred to a social, legal, or other agency	21	19	21

consulting counselors; correcting student publicly) in a more favorable light. Parent responses displayed very low frequencies below the top seven rankings and thus cannot be meaningfully compared beyond noting the consistency with which those highly rated actions were preferred.

Overall Assessment of School Discipline

The original and follow-up instruments asked respondents to provide an overall assessment of school discipline. Results of two items related to this portion of the survey revealed some clear differences in perception. Teachers were much less satisfied than students or parents with school discipline in general. Nearly half the parents responding (49 percent) and over half of the students (57 percent) felt that discipline was currently satisfactory in their schools. The majority of teachers (53 percent) rated discipline as less than satisfactory, although a much smaller percentage of these respondents (7 percent) called discipline very poor at present.

In reflecting on current school discipline in relation to the past, students and parents again were more positive in their judgments. Teachers comparing current discipline with what they recalled ten years ago nearly all rated the present situation worse (41 percent) or much worse (45 percent). Students and parents, whose responses reflect a narrower perspective on their local schools, were more divided in their assessments. Students generally found discipline to be about the same (40 percent), while parents felt discipline was a greater (28 percent) or much greater (38 percent) problem, but not with the degree of consistency exhibited by teachers and other educators.

DISCUSSION

Results of two parallel studies investigating school discipline have provided important information concerning the views of teachers and other educators, students, and parents. The appearance of major differences in the discipline problems perceived as highly important by teachers, students, and parents requires further discussion and study. The only problem areas receiving strong support in all three respondent groups involved apathetic or inattentive behavior. Generally, the leading problems reported by students or parents were given low to moderate emphasis by teachers and other educators, and vice versa. The extensive discrepancies found in these two studies, which involved large samples of teachers and students, must be interpreted as important evidence of seriously conflicting perceptions and assumptions about school discipline. Steps need to be taken to stimulate discussion of these differences and promote a shared understanding of the problems which are and should be regarded as most important. Closer agreement on the nature of the problems faced is a prerequisite to successful problem solving efforts.

Further, the strong agreement concerning apathy and inattention as leading discipline problems (in the midst of an otherwise divergent set of responses) suggests the use of this general area as a starting point for improvement. Communication needs to be initiated among students, educators, and parents at the school or district level to generate ideas and begin work on alleviating these complex problems.

To provide a context for examining apathy, inattention, and other key discipline problems, it will be helpful to utilize the information about related conditions or influences gained in these two studies. All groups agreed, for example, that out-of-school factors are most influential. However, they differed considerably in their perceptions of the specific

out-of-school influences which have the greatest impact on school discipline problems. Some of these, such as peer pressures, can often be altered or moderated through teacher intervention, while others (e.g. improper training at home) are less likely to be substantially affected by school personnel.

In neither study, it is important to note, were curriculuar/instructional factors given much importance, although researchers and theorists believe they have established important links between curricular/instructional practices and classroom behavior. Several school and classroom related conditions and influences did receive considerable emphasis in one or more respondent groups, enabling researchers and practitioners to pinpoint key discipline-related factors which are at least partly under school control.

Results of the two studies demonstrated important similarities and differences among teachers, students, and parents with respect to disciplinary actions. There was strong agreement demonstrated about the actions which should be taken to solve leading discipline problems. These widely supported strategies involve improvement-oriented conferences with students, meetings with parents, and other personal rather than group or administrative approaches. Certainly this expressed accord regarding the actions likely to be more effective should be explored further. It should be used as a basis for investigating programs and processes designed to help more teachers adopt these preferred techniques where appropriate.

Another important result of the two studies which merits further study is the sharp divergence between the actions which students reported as most frequently used in their schools and those which teachers named as the recommended techniques. The findings of these studies suggest that there may be a sizeable discrepancy between current disciplinary practices and those which educators profess to use. The extent of this gap and the reasons for its actual or perceived existence require additional study if positive action is

to be taken to improve school discipline. The need for this type of investigation is underscored by results of a recent survey of school administrators. In this AASA Critical Issues Survey,[4] responses by over 2,000 administrators indicated that school districts have devoted more attention to punitive measures than preventive and developmental measures. They urge assertive leadership (beginning with top level administrators) aimed at improving instruction, promoting parent and student involvement, and developing effective inservice programs.

A study conducted by Daniel Duke also emphasizes the need to trace the apparent existence of "perceptual dissonance" in the views of administrators, teachers, and students. This phenomenon could account, as Duke points out, for a good deal of the uncertainty and inconsistency associated with our current understanding of school discipline and our approaches to solving discipline problems.[5] Researchers, theorists, and practitioners should make a concerted effort to build on the information we now possess about the perceptions of various groups regarding school discipline. Studies are needed to more thoroughly depict the nature of current similarities and differences in perceptions and practices. At the same time, an improved conceptual framework is needed to give direction to the development and application of effective strategies for discipline in the nation's schools.

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[4]Ben Brodinsky. Critical Issues Report: Student Discipline Problems and Solutions. American Association of School Administrators, 1980.

[5]Daniel L. Duke. "How Administrators View the Crisis in School Discipline." Phi Delta Kappan, January, 1978, p. 325-30.